

Valley readies for new refugees

Thousands of Hmong could settle here.

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WASHINGTON -- Peter Vang wants the Central Valley ready for the region's newest, neediest residents.

Soon, hundreds, if not thousands of Hmong refugees, are likely to be Valley-bound. Prime locations include Merced, Fresno and San Joaquin counties because they are already home to many refugees dispersed since the end of the Vietnam War.

For Vang, Fresno County's refugee community liaison, this means the time to prepare is now.

So this afternoon, he's convening with congressional representatives and others hoping to avoid surprises once the State Department starts processing up to 15,000 Hmong war refugees stuck in Thailand.

"Traditionally, in the past, a large percentage will come to California, and Fresno will be a center," Vang said.

Vang estimated between 2,000 and 3,000 of the new Hmong refugees could end up in California, with many reaching the Central Valley.

Firm predictions are impossible, though, which is one of the reasons regional officials are scrambling.

The Fresno-based Valley Catholic Charities, for instance, anticipates taking on at least some responsibilities for the newcomers once they start arriving this summer. This means, in part, getting reauthorized as a voluntary refugee-handling agency by federal officials.

The previous authorization expired because so few refugees were arriving in recent years.

In 2001, only 22 refugees from Laos entered the United States, and none settled in California.

"It was just not possible to keep a full staff waiting for one or two refugees every few months," said Pai Yang, who will oversee the new refugee work for Valley Catholic Charities. But, "when no one else is able to do this work, it's a role that we can play."

The office of Rep. Cal Dooley, D-Fresno, is hosting today's brainstorming session, though it's not a particularly partisan issue. Representatives from the office of Mariposa Republican George Radanovich will attend the meeting, as will Tom Bohigian, the acting state director for Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer.

"There are a lot of things I just need to make sure we understand more fully," Dooley said.

These unresolved questions include, for instance, precisely how much support the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement will offer, and how the money will flow. Nationwide, the agency provides about \$450 million a year.

Nor is the Central Valley alone in seeking answers. In March, a Minnesota delegation, including the mayor of St. Paul, will travel to Thailand to learn more about the new refugees.

Since the 1990s, Hmong refugees have gathered around the Buddhist temple of Wat Tham Krabok. Until last month, the State Department had not considered these refugees candidates for resettlement to the United States.

But shortly before Christmas, U.S. officials shifted gears and declared that they would begin processing refugee

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applications from Wat Tham Krabok starting in February.

It's welcome news among refugee groups in the Central Valley, home to an estimated 50,000 Hmong. During the Vietnam War, these mountain people aided the U.S. war effort.

After the communist takeover of Laos, many fled.

The federal government provides housing, food, clothing and medical and social referrals in the first 30 days that a refugee is in the United States. Single adults and childless couples can get refugee cash and medical assistance for up to eight months, while couples with children can use other domestic welfare services. Targeted grants can provide further funding.

In 2001, for instance, the Office of Refugee Resettlement provided \$300,000 to the Merced Lao Family Community and \$250,000 to the Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission to help with refugees.

But even in the best of times, newly arrived refugees face serious hurdles. Sixty-one percent of the refugees who arrived in 2001 were unemployed that year, according to an Office of Refugee Resettlement report.

The unemployment rate typically falls the longer a refugee has lived in the United States, but it's still high. Among those who arrived in 1998, the unemployment rate in 2001 was 31%.

Forty percent of the Southeast Asian refugees who arrived between 1996 and 2001 relied on food stamps, the federal office added. Central Valley county budgets have all felt the crunch, as well.

"There were huge impacts with this [initial] influx [of refugees and immigrants]," Merced Democrat Dennis Cardoza said, "but the children are the valedictorians in high school, and they're doing really well."

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